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ABSTRACT

This review of the current status of combined school-public (community) libraries in Vermont acknowledges that, while on the surface the concept appears to be just the answer for many communities with limited funds and other resources, it also raises many questions about the nature of library service to a community. The paper provides: (1) a brief history of the development of community libraries from the early 1970s to the present; (2) a list of the current community libraries; (3) the positive and negative aspects of having a community library; (4) actions a public library board should take if they are considering development of a community library; and (5) an annotated bibliography of seven works on community library failures and successes in the United States and Canada. (THC)

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COMBINED SCHOOL-PUBLIC (COMMUNITY) LIBRARIES
A Brief Overview

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The issue of combining school and public library service in a community has been debated and studied for many years. It is a concept that, on the surface, appears just the answer for many communities with limited funds and other resources. But it also raises many questions about the nature of library service to a community.

As most of us are aware, providing effective, appropriate library service is difficult, regardless of the clientele. A public library serves a broad spectrum of ages and users - do-it-yourselfers, recreational readers, researchers, preschoolers, etc. It needs continually to assess community needs, weigh them against community and library resources, and establish priorities for service.

A school library must respond to its specific clientele - teachers and students - as well as to school curriculum. It cannot chart its course as freely as a public library might. Combining two types of libraries which serve different needs in different ways is much more difficult than concentrating on one or the other. Full service for all isn't easy or inexpensive.

HISTORY. In the early 1970's several combined school-public, hereafter referred to as "community," libraries were developed in Vermont. In 1976 the Vermont Board of Libraries established approval guidelines which evolved into minimum standards for community libraries in 1979. Community libraries were expected to meet those standards as well as the minimum standards for Vermont public libraries and any state school library standards.

A 1985 revision of the standards for Vermont public libraries did away with an extra set of standards for community libraries; instead, there are standards which specifically address public libraries in multi-purpose facilities. Copies of the revision are available from me, but although they have been approved by the Board of Libraries they will not go into effect until approval by the Legislative Administrative Rules Committee. In 1984, the Vermont Department of Education issued new standards for schools which include school library/media centers. Jean Battey, School Library/Media Coordinator, 828-3111, can answer questions about these standards.

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CURRENT COMMUNITY LIBRARIES. There are several community libraries in Vermont, and not all of them meet standards. They are:

Chittenden Public/Barstow Memorial Library - in the elementary school serving both Chittenden and Mendon; does not meet standards
Fairfax Community Library - in a school serving K - 12 and housing the Town Clerk's office; meets standards
New Haven Community Library - in the elementary school; does not meet standards
Readsboro Public Library - in the elementary school; meets standards
South Burlington Community Library - in the high school; meets standards
South Hero Community Library - in the elementary school which is also the community center; meets standards
Stamford Community Library - in a building which houses the Town Clerk's office, senior meal site, and elementary school; meets public library standards but not community library standards
Glee Merritt Kelly Community Library, Wolcott - in the elementary school; meets standards

There are a few other public libraries which are located in schools but which do not call themselves "community libraries." The West Brattleboro branch of Brattleboro's Brooks Memorial and Starksboro Public are among them. Several public libraries also offer service to local schools because there is no school library. In some cases the school arranges for the library to be open additional hours for school class visits and also pays the public librarian's salary for that time. Libraries in Castleton, Pomfret, Grafton, Reading, Bridgewater, Pawlet, and Barre are among those having various arrangements with local schools. It is unclear what impact the 1984 state standards covering school libraries will have on these activities.

PROS AND CONS. There are many factors to consider in combining school and public libraries. Briefly, here are the positive aspects of having a community library:

1. the possible cost savings in elimination of some duplication of materials, staff, maintenance, utilities, and effort
2. the development of a community focal point for adults and children to learn and enrich themselves together
3. the easy physical access and good parking as well as the expanded hours open
4. the availability of trained staff, expanded space, audiovisual equipment and materials, and other special facilities
5. the possible increased use and awareness of library services and resources in a community - schools are more visible and almost everyone knows where their local school is

On the negative side, consider:

1. the hesitation of some adults to use the library, particularly in a high school, during school hours; this

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hesitation could also extend to preschoolers and their parents

2. the extra effort needed to maintain a balanced collection to suit all needs and to maintain principles of intellectual freedom and confidentiality

3. the extra effort needed to promote public library service, provide public library programs, and create a welcoming atmosphere in a school setting

4. the continuing commitment needed by staff, school administration, and trustees to total community service - not a hybrid, but very different from either public or school library service; and the necessity for these various groups to develop a unified vision and a harmonious pattern of working together

5. the difficulty in resolution of service philosophies concerning discipline, noise, fines, borrowing privileges, rules and regulations, hours open, etc.

The larger the community, the more difficult it is to strike the necessary balance in providing service to all. In fact, Wilma Woolard (see bibliography) feels that a population of 5,000 is the maximum size that should consider a combined facility. The general public needs to feel as comfortable as it might in a separate public library. It must not feel intimidated or overwhelmed by school elements. In a larger school, this might occur more easily as school library service requirements increase. In a school setting, for example, it may be easier to justify the purchase of assignment-related nonfiction over popular fiction or the hiring of additional staff for reference over storytelling. The school population is also a visible, "captive audience," and it is only natural for a library staff to fill immediate clients' needs first before soliciting more users. The general public needs to be encouraged to use library resources and services through vigorous promotion. A community librarian has to discern, balance, and meet spoken and unspoken needs of users and nonusers. That's quite a challenge.

CONSIDERING COMBINING? Any public library board considering development of a community library should VISIT several of these facilities. A visit is imperative to catch the atmosphere, and the libraries in Fairfax, South Burlington, and Stamford offer a variety of approaches. When visiting, look for an atmosphere that welcomes all ages, as well as materials, displays, and equipment for all ages. Try to put yourself in the shoes of a preschooler, a fifth grader, a tenth grader, a young professional, a business person, a disabled person, a parent. How would it feel to enter the library for the first time? How would it feel to use it regularly? Is access easy? Do you feel as if you are entering a public library, or do you feel as if you are in a school library that allows visitors? This is the heart of the matter.

Also make sure you TALK with librarians, trustees, and school officials when you visit. Each has a perspective to share and will offer insight into the issues you need to consider. Get some history: why was this solution to providing library service chosen? What problems and concerns did they have in developing it?

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What still faces them--today and in the long run? Have they actually realized any cost savings? What do they see as the library's role in the community and as its primary clientele? How do they manage funds? Who selects books and how? Who runs the library day to day? Who does this person report to? You should make yourself as aware as possible of future conflicts regarding funding and control of library operations.

Finally, know that we at the Department of Libraries are here to help you weigh alternative solutions so that you may choose the path that best suits your library and community. Please call on us for advice, with questions, or just to discuss options. Each community has different needs and resources. Its public library must respond appropriately.

All in all, while a combined school-public library seems like a smart idea, it is insufficient for the school library simply to open its doors to the general public. Concerted effort must be devoted to providing full, effective, responsive public library service.

FURTHER READING. Much has been written about community library failures and successes nationwide and abroad. Further reading is available on interlibrary loan, including materials in the Department of Libraries Library Science Collection. Some of the most outstanding of these are:

Aaron, Shirley L. A STUDY OF COMBINED SCHOOL-PUBLIC LIBRARIES. ALA, 1980. Packages and reorganizes three previous volumes in one for "School Media Centers: Focus on Trends and Issues" series. Limited bibliography. LS 027.4.

Aaron, Shirley L. A STUDY OF THE COMBINED SCHOOL PUBLIC LIBRARY, 3 vols. Florida State Univ., 1977-78. Aaron was commissioned by the State Library of Florida to conduct a broad national and specific state survey to determine the potential for combined facilities for improving library service. Phase 1: development of evaluative instrument; methods of research. Phase 2: looks at Florida combinations, past and current. Phase 3: checklist for determining whether a combination is best alternative; summary; conclusion. This is the major study in the field, but its conclusions are skeptical and cautionary. LS 027.4

Haycock, Ken. "Combined School/public Library Service, or Here We Go Again," Canadian School Library Assn., Occasional Paper no. 2. 1973. Emphasizes the need to examine the aims of each institution carefully before forging ahead. Selected bibliography.

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Kitchens, James A. THE OLNEY EXPERIMENT: A VENTURE IN COOPERATION AND MERGER OF SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES. North Texas State Univ., 1981. Olney, Texas, pop. 3600, combined three school libraries and the public library in one facility in 1979 using federal funds. This reviews the whole - now-famous - project which began in 1971 when all four facilities were separate and inadequate. LS 021.64.

Kitchens, James A. THE OLNEY VENTURE: AN EXPERIMENT IN COORDINATION AND MERGER OF SCHOOL AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES. North Texas State Univ., 1975. This outlines the gradual cooperative efforts involved before building a new facility on "campus" and combining the collections. LS 027.4764.

Woolard, Wilma L. "The Combined School and Public Library: Can It Work?" LIBRARY JOURNAL, Feb. 15, 1978, p. 435-8. Adapted from a thesis and expanded in the book below. Positive, if conditions are right.

Woolard, Wilma Lee Broughton. COMBINED SCHOOL/PUBLIC LIBRARIES; A SURVEY WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS. Scarecrow, 1980. Revision and expansion of master's thesis offers positive steps in making a combined facility work in small communities (under 5,000). Very extensive annotated bibliography. Good companion to Aaron. LS 027.4

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